

German past participles and *sancta simplicitas*

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In their article 'Psycholinguistics without "psychological reality"', Maria Black and Shulamit Chiat have argued the case for abandoning 'the notion of "psychological reality"' (1981: 37), pointing to 'the contradictions and *non sequiturs* found whenever psychological reality is mentioned' (1981: 58, n. 9) in linguistic literature. Interestingly, the same issue of *Linguistics* provides us with a case in point. Roland A. Wolff (henceforth W) reports on a test intended to address the 'general question ... : To what extent does a formal grammar (a linguist's account, or model) correspond to a speaker's internalized grammar (competence)?' (1981: 3; if not otherwise indicated in the following, page references are to Wolff, 1981).

Wolff's argument

W designed a test for eliciting the past participles of eight German 'nonsense verbs' — verbs invented by the tester — from 29 German speakers. Many, but by no means all, German past participles (PPs) bear a prefix *ge-*, e.g., *gesehen* 'seen' but *besucht* 'visited', not **gebesucht*. According to W, there are three classes of verbs lacking *ge-* PPs. These may be hinted at by quoting typical members, as in Table 1, column I, under A, B, and C. Rubric DI (= row D, column I) contains verbs that have *ge-* PPs. Column II contains the eight nonsense verbs to which we return in a moment.

W compares two accounts of the distribution of *ge-* with PPs. Account 1 specifies exceptions to a rule that demands *ge-* for PPs. W tries to characterize categories AI, BI, and CI by (1), (2), and (3), respectively:

- (1) 'verbs with the inseparable prefixes *be-*, *emp-*, *ent-*, *er-*, *ge-*, *ver-*, *zer-*, *über-*, *um-*, *unter-*, *miss-*, etc.' (p. 5).
- (2) 'verbs with [an] infinitive [ending] in *-ieren*' (p. 5).¹

Table 1. German verbs and nonsense verbs

	I	II
A	<i>empfehlen</i> , PP: <i>empfohlen</i> 'recommend' <i>besuchen</i> 'visit' ...	<i>erpörten</i> <i>verkickten</i>
B	<i>studieren</i> , PP: <i>studiert</i> 'study' ...	<i>kallieren</i>
C	<i>miauen</i> , PP: <i>miaut</i> 'meow' <i>posaunen</i> 'trumpet' ...	<i>dotschkitten</i> <i>putzgären</i>
D	<i>sprechen</i> , PP: <i>gesprochen</i> 'speak' <i>fallen</i> 'fall' ...	<i>blickzühnen</i> <i>göben</i> <i>rétzen</i>

(3) verbs which are from neither A nor B 'but whose past participles nevertheless lack *ge-*' (p. 5).

Theoretically, W suggests, verbs from CI may be construed as

(4) 'verbs belonging to a limited category simply marked in the lexicon as arbitrarily and idiosyncratically "minus *ge-*"' (p. 5).

Account 2 gives a rule based on word accent (marked as ' ' in Table 1): the past participles of all verbs with unaccented first syllable have no *ge-*, all others have. Assuming that both approaches cover the (same) facts (but see note 14), W claims that account 2 is the simpler one² and should be preferred by a grammarian since 'linguistic theory invariably favours the simplest, most general account of linguistic phenomena' (p. 4).

What W wants to demonstrate is that this metatheoretical requirement of simplicity, 'the simplicity metric', does not have an 'internalized equivalent' (cf. p. 6), i.e., does not have 'psychological reality'. The alleged proof consists in showing that some German speakers do not obey account 2 when they are induced to form the PPs of nonsense verbs; this means, W believes, that they have not internalized the simplest rule possible. To conduct his test, W tried to devise nonsense verbs of the categories he had found to be relevant to *ge-* distribution in actual German:

- (5) 'native speakers of German were presented with a number of nonsense verbs of all three categories [viz. those specified in (1), (2), (3)] (i.e., inseparable prefix verbs, *-ieren* verbs and verbs which were neither inseparable-prefix nor *-ieren*, but nevertheless with unaccented first syllable)' (p. 6).

These were the verbs in rubrics AII, BII, and CII in Table 1. In addition there were the 'nonsense verbs *göben* ('overeat') and *retzen* ('blush'), which of course do not fit into any of the categories of verbs lacking *ge-*' (p. 7) and thus figure in rubric DII.

All participants responded as expected, forming minus-*ge-* PPs for *erporten*, *verkicken*, *kallieren* and plus-*ge-* PPs for *goben* and *retzen*. It was only with the CII nonsense verbs *dotschkitten*, *blickzühnen*, and *putzgären* that W found 'mixed results': for these verbs, 62% of the participants formed PPs without *ge-*, but 38% formed *ge-* PPs. W concludes that 'a majority of 62% of the participants have internalized a rule analogous to account 2, the account favoured by the simplicity metric' [= group 2] (p. 9). These participants formed *dotschkittet*, etc., in accordance with the rule that *ge-* is not prefixed where the first syllable is unaccented. However, to take care of forms like *gedotschkittet*, which do not fit in with this rule, W assumes 'a significant number of the participants in this test ... have evidently internalized a rule strikingly at variance with the principles of the simplicity metric' [= group 1] (p. 9).

Evaluation

In the light of such studies as Black and Chiat's, a sceptical attitude toward claims for psychological reality is surely indicated. Thus one may feel sympathetic toward W's attack on the sanctuary of simplicity as a psychological must. Then, however, it seems all the odder that W bases his argument against assuming a psychological equivalent to the simplicity metric on the most naive claims for the psychological reality of grammatical rules; in particular, on the claim that group 1 speakers have 'internalized' some rule for PP forming which does not correspond to account 2. It should be commonplace practice by now that one ought to look for interfering factors if a simple and general rule fails in a limited domain (instead of rashly abandoning it). Formerly we may have been inclined to accept account 2 — a rule that takes care of actual spoken German — as reflecting a psychological reality (if we bothered about psychological reality at all). Now W wants us to accept accounts 1 and 2 as being 'real' with different speakers, and to take this as proving his thesis. These are the consequences he wants us to draw on the basis of no

more than apparently deviant responses with respect to three 'German nonsense verbs'!

Does he provide a linguistic explanation of his purported findings? No, instead he offers some vague speculations about the education the participants received. He suggests that adherence to a rule based on word accent corresponds to 'higher' education and that group 2 speakers may have been influenced by school instruction or grammar books. We should not suspect, however, that group 2 participants consciously made use of a grammar rule, since W takes pains to convince us that his test forced the participants 'to provide immediate responses (this to guard against the kind of critical, intellectualized reflection which might have resulted in what the speaker felt were "correct" Standard German responses)' (p. 7). If W's suggestions are to be coherent, we have to assume that group 2 speakers have been induced by school instruction to internalize account 2 in place of account 1. But if both accounts are extensionally equivalent for actual German, neither the learner nor the teacher would have been motivated to press for such a move. Thus the 'explanation' is without plausibility. However the case may be, differences in education between groups 1 and 2 are in fact NOT significant.³

Now let me substantiate my incredulity toward W's argument by a comparison between the curious behavior of CII verbs and the actual German verbs found under CI. For W's test to work, his nonsense verbs must be, in a sense, possible German verbs. It might be difficult to specify exactly what a possible German verb is. Instead W presents us his nonsense verbs as analogues to actual German verbs. Furthermore, as stated in (5) *expressis verbis*, he believes the nonsense verbs to be recognizable as belonging to certain classes. My Table 1 reflects this conviction by arranging actual verbs and nonsense verbs in the rows A to D.

Our three verbs of special interest, viz. *putzgären*, *blickzühnen*, and *dotschküiten* (for short V1, V2, and V3, respectively), should be, according to (5), elements of the same class as the verbs under CI. Is that true? First, let us see what the test says. Since the classification is irrelevant for group 2 speakers (they are assumed to obey the word-accent rule), we have to consider group 1 speakers. For these, CI verbs do not have *ge-* PPs, whereas CII-verbs do; that is (3) and (4) do NOT hold for CII verbs with respect to group 1. We may still resort to (5), where W gives a third characterization⁴ of category C ($C = CI \cup CII$): C verbs have an unaccented first syllable and are in neither A nor B. But this does not give us a positive criterion for C.⁵ All we can gather from (5) is that C verbs are in neither A nor B nor D: C is the remainder. Obviously, putting CII verbs into a rest-class that already contains CI verbs does not prove any similarity between the two groups of verbs.

What is not mentioned in W's test is that all CI verbs (see Curme, 1952: 257, and other grammars for more examples) are noncomplex, i.e., their stems are neither compound nor derived. As for CII nonsense verbs, by their very nature we cannot be sure what properties they have. From a structural point of view they could all be construed as compounds. In fact, the participants in the test were given indirect evidence that these verbs are complex, and moreover that they are, to a certain degree, semantically motivated. The reader will have noticed that in the quoted passage concerning *góben* and *rétzen* (see above), W gives English glosses, although these verbs are 'nonsense verbs', too. W mentions this point only in a note, where we read, 'In order to render the test more natural ... a contrived definition was provided for each nonsense verb' (p. 7).⁶ The three verbs under discussion were glossed as *putzgären* 'clean up', *blickzühnen* 'be angry', and *dotschkitten* 'destroy'. Along with the infinitival ending *-en* we may tentatively identify two morphemes as constituents of each verb:

Putz and *gär*. Both are actually occurring verb stems. What the English reader of W's article may not know is that *putzen* does in fact mean 'clean (up)'. *Gären* means 'ferment' or 'effervesce'. (Where something is effervescing there may be good reason to clean up.)

Blick and *zühn*. Again, *blick* 'look' is an actually occurring morpheme, a verb stem and a noun. *Zühn*, presumably to be pronounced as [tsy:n], occurs in [tsy:nɪ], 'cynical'. Phonetically as well as graphetically, *zühnen* also calls to mind the verb *sühnen* [zy:nən], 'expiate'; possibly also *zürnen* [tsyrnən], particularly since the last verb does in fact mean 'to be angry'.

Dotsch and *kitt*. *Dotsch* does not occur, but it may resemble *detsch* in *zerdetschen*, colloquial for 'destroy'! (Note that speakers may construe a word as a compound even though not every part is a recurrent morpheme, cf., e.g., *himbeere* 'raspberry'.) *Kitt* is again Standard German (verb stem or noun) meaning 'cement' but is also more widely used to mean 'glue (or stick) together'; that is, some kind of sense relation such as converseness between *kitten* and *dotschkitten* suggests itself.

To be sure, V1-3 are not motivated compounds or derivatives in a strict sense; that is, there is no way of computing their meanings from their constituents' meanings. But there is a strong suggestion that these contribute in some vaguer manner — a fact W does not inform his readers of. In sum, even in the absence of clear criteria for CI and CII verbs, we can assert that CII verbs are not analogous to CI verbs in the way AII, BII, and DII verbs are analogous to those in AI, BI, and DI, respectively. It is true, both types of verbs have a noninitial accent,⁷ but they differ in their morphological and semantic structure.⁸

If CII verbs are not from the same subclass as CI verbs, the basis for

expecting them to form PPs in the same way is lost.⁹ This result in itself might be taken to deprive the test of its value. Assuming that V1-3 are complex, i.e., compound or derived verbs of the form $A + \hat{B} + en$, we have to look for actual German verbs of this form to establish V1-3 as 'possible German verbs'. This will bring us closer to explaining why V1-3 are not uniformly assigned minus-ge- PPs. Unlike very many German verbs, V1-3 are not subject to tmesis, i.e., their constituents cannot be separated in a sentence.¹⁰ This is guaranteed within the test by presenting their third-person indicative active present and past forms in main clauses such as (6), as well as by accentuation (with tmesis verbs the 'separable part' bears the main accent).

- (6) *er dotschkittet(e) das bild*
(not: *er kittet(e) das bild dotsch*).

Accordingly, no participant formed PPs such as *dotschgekittet*. Verbs without tmesis and with unstressed first syllable, e.g., *übereichen* 'hand a thing over', as a rule fall into W's class A. What W calls 'inseparable prefixes' is a small, closed class;¹¹ thus his assumption that V1-3 are not 'inseparable prefix verbs', see (5), is warrantable. There is another class of verbs, call it category E, without tmesis, including, for instance, *frühstücken* '(have) breakfast' (from *frühstück* 'breakfast'), *ohrfeigen* 'box a person's ears' (from *ohrfeige* 'slap in the face'), etc. However, these denominal verbs are always accented on the first syllable. Thus V1-3 do not fall into this class either.

In fact there are hardly any verbs of the form $A + \hat{B} + en$ where A is not a 'prefix'. Among these are *frohlocken* 'be jubilant', *lobpreisen* 'sing the praises of', *willfahren* 'comply with someone's wishes', *offenbaren* 'reveal', and *liebkosten* 'caress'. It is not always quite clear how these verbs are composed or derived,¹² but they are obviously complex. That is, they are similar to V1-3 in that they show (i) noninitial accent and (ii) some semantic motivation without being completely transparent (*froh* 'joyful', *lob* 'praise', *preisen* 'praise', etc.). However, these verbs are stylistically marked; they may be expected in religious contexts, for instance, but not in everyday spoken language; to say the least, they are elevated, if not obsolete. The active vocabulary of average speakers is not likely to include a generalizable verb pattern of which they are instances. Result: the existence of verbs like *putzgären* in ordinary spoken German is not an established fact.

Speakers that are induced to form the PPs of '(im)possible' German verbs will have to assimilate these to their own language. As for V1-3, the only way to do so coherently is to match them to some unfamiliar verbs such as *lobpreisen*. Actually, the PPs of these verbs are even more

unfamiliar than their infinitives or imperatives (cf. *wir wollen den herrn lobpreisen!* 'let us praise the Lord' vs. (?) *er hat den herrn lobpriesen/lobgepriesen/gelobpriesen/gelobpreist* 'he has praised the Lord'). Many speakers may be uncertain how to form them. While these verbs usually have minus-ge- PPs, plus-ge- PPs do exist as well, although these are correlated with different accentuations, cf. *frohlöckt* and *gefröhlockt*. (See Maier, 1901, and good reference grammars, e.g., Curme, 1952: 257; or Schulz and Griesbach, 1978: 22 n.). Small wonder if we find both types of PPs with similar nonsense verbs.¹³

Finally, we should consider the possibility that the pattern of construction exemplified by *frohlocken* is not available as an active pattern, for some speakers at least. If this is so, V1-3 show disparate features. As they do not undergo tmesis and are not likely to be inseparable-prefix verbs, their morphological structure does not fit their accent. Morphologically they should be in the same class as, e.g., *wirtschaften* 'keep house', that is, class E. Therefore they should show plus-ge- PPs indeed! But, as noted, these verbs have accented first syllables. From the point of view of word accent, V1-3 would have to have minus-ge- PPs, of course, but in this case they clash with the system of German verbs. Thus, when presented with V1-3, participants who have no access to 'unfamiliar verbs' face a dilemma. They may choose to ignore the 'false' accent and form plus-ge- PPs (group 1), or they may choose to ignore the lack of a suitable verb class and form minus-ge- PPs according to the general rule (account 2/ group 2).

Conclusion

W bases his argument on the behavior of three invented 'nonsense verbs', V1-3. The characterization of V1-3 as formed in analogy to certain actual German verbs (in CI) is descriptively inadequate. Contrary to the intended analogy, it is suggested to the participants of W's test that V1-3 are partly motivated compound or derived verbs. This unpleasant artifact derives from what seemed to be the innocent intention of making the test 'more natural'. The only verbs in actual German that resemble V1-3 are heavily restricted with respect to their usage. Formation of past participles with these is uncertain and varying. Thus 'deviation' in PP forming with V1-3 cannot be taken to prove much. Moreover, the test suffers not only from an unwanted artifact and an insufficient descriptive basis but also from a willingness to jump to unwarranted conclusions. In concluding that some speakers do not obey the usual rule for PP forming stated in terms of word accent, W overlooks the possibility of interfering factors,

here the impossibility of construing V1-3 as formed in accordance with some usual pattern. He simply stipulates that some speakers have 'internalized' a different rule¹⁴ and, out of this, he draws general consequences concerning the psychological reality of simplicity. I think this kind of simplicity (in argumentation) should be abandoned at all events.

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Notes

1. What counts is the occurrence of the derivational morpheme *ier*, of course, not the phonological or graphematic form. The same holds for verbs ending in *-eien* like *prophezeien* (PP: *prophezeit*), which W does not mention.
2. Let us accept this premise for the sake of the argument. It may not be indisputable, since the simplicity requirement familiar from the theory of generative grammar relates to total grammars.
3. W notices that only a 'small number of speakers' (p. 10), i.e., 29, were tested, but he asserts that 'the tendency to produce past participles consistent with the account favoured by the simplicity metric, account 2, increased in direct proportion to the speaker's level of formal education' (p. 10). His result, he thinks, 'suggests that if the test had been conducted with a greater proportion of less formally educated, and hence linguistically more naive, participants ... the proportion of responses revealing underlying competence based on account 1 would have been even greater' (p. 10). This suggestion is unscientific. W brushes aside the difficulty of drawing conclusions on the basis of a small sample and claims in a completely impressionistic manner that a larger sample would reveal the correlation which he BELIEVES to hold.

The data are as follows (absolute number of participants):

	No gymnasium	Not (yet) finished gymnasium	Graduated from gymnasium	Attending university	Graduated from university
Group 1	2	3	2	2	2
Group 2	2	2	6	2	6

(I have collapsed W's categories 'Attending gymnasium' and 'Did not finish gymnasium', since there were no group 2 speakers in the latter category.)

A χ^2 test does NOT show a statistically significant association. Properly speaking, the null hypothesis H_0 cannot be rejected on the 5% level. Actually, the significance is $\alpha = 0.6152 \hat{=} 61.52\%$. The raw chi square is 2.66566 with 4 degrees of freedom, thus much less than 9.49 (which we would have to require). Further collapsing of columns does not help: we simply do not get significances which would justify rejecting the null

hypothesis, viz. that there is no association between the participants' education and their belonging to groups 1 and 2, respectively.

4. Curiously, the characterization in (5) (as opposed to (3/4)) mentions word accent, although the whole verb classification is, from W's point of view, only supposed to approximate the participle formation of group 1, which is by presupposition NOT based on word accent.
5. W might reject my quest for a positive criterion for C as misconceived, since he claims (falsely, I think) that the absence of *ge-* PPs with CI verbs is idiosyncratic and arbitrary. However, in this case, my point that CII verbs are not analogous to CI verbs would be trivially true.
6. Unfortunately, we are not told what these definitions looked like. In his paper W gives only English glosses, whereas the test was conducted in German. Neither does W give the exact pronunciation of his nonsense verbs but only orthographical representations.
7. They show what has been called (by van Dam, 1944: 90–100) *Akzentverschiebung* [accent-postponing].
8. They may also differ with respect to valency. At least those CI verbs quoted paradigmatically do not obligatorily have complements such as accusative objects. We are not informed about the valency of CII verbs above in what we can conclude from sentence (6).
9. Preliminary testing indicates that 'deviations' in PP forming do not arise with true CI nonsense verbs like for instance *tonören* (PP: *tonórt*). This may be due to the fact that *tonören* (just like *miauen* and *posaunen*) has a first syllable of the phonological form CV; cf. also similar cases of accent postponing, e.g., *holünder* vs. *hólder*, both: 'elder (-bush)', *forélle* 'trout'.
10. For tmesis, cf. e.g., *radfahren* (*rad* 'wheel, cycle' + *fahren* 'ride, drive') in *fritz fährt heute rad* 'Fritz rides a bicycle today'; PP: *radgefahren*.
11. Actually, the inseparable prefixes fall into two classes, viz. those occurring as constituents of compound verbs — these are *durch*, *hinter*, *über*, *um*, *unter*, *wider* (prepositional prefixes); *wieder* (adverb); and *voll* (adjective) — and those occurring as constituents of derived verbs — these are the remaining ones listed in (1).
12. *Frohlocken*, for instance, is sometimes construed as diachronically related to *frolock* (Grimm and Grimm, 1878: column 229), sometimes as related to *vro* + *lecken* (Kluge, 1975: 220).
13. To avoid misunderstandings, the existence of *ge-* PPs as well as minus-*ge-* PPs with verbs like *frohlocken* does not confirm W's hypothesis that there are two groups of speakers following different rules. Rather the formation of *frohlockt* just as of *gefröhlockt* is in accordance with the rule that forbids *ge-* to precede an unaccented syllable. (I wonder whether W's representations of elicited forms, e.g., *gedotschkittet*, reflect responses accurately enough to exclude the possibility that the second syllable had some accent.)
14. I am not going to speculate about 'internalized rules'. It should be obvious, however, that we have no good reason to conclude that group 1 speakers have internalized a rule in variance with account 2 if we assume that group 1 speakers have incorporated V1–3 into category E. Alternatively, one may assume that all speakers form PPs on the basis of a classification of verbs but differ in construing verbs that do not neatly fit into the system. Actually, we will not manage to describe PP formation without recourse to such a classification, since compound verbs based on minus-*ge-* verbs do not have *ge-* PPs even if they are accented on the first syllable. Examples: *ánempfehlen*, PP: *anempfohlen* (cf. A1); *éinstudieren*, PP: *einstudiert* (cf. B1); *áusposaunen*, PP: *ausposaunt* (CI). Account 2 does not take care of these actual German verbs.

In any case, my point is that evidence from peripheral nonsense verbs like V1-3 is of no use for substantiating W's (or for that matter, anyone's) claims.

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